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Popular Netflix drama 13 Reasons Why sends out worrying messages about suicide

Netflix drama 13 Reasons Why deals with fictional teenager Hannah Baker's death by suicide. Before her death, she recorded a series of 13 cassette tapes, each addressing a person whose actions she felt were instrumental in leading her to the point where she had no option but to take her own life. As a suicide researcher and someone personally affected by suicide, I was very concerned about the messages that come through the programme as well as the way suicide was depicted. Here's why:

It normalises and legitimises suicide. By providing clear reasons why a person would want to take their own life, the series suggests that suicide is reasonable, given a particular set of circumstances. This is an unhelpful message to send. People who have experienced similar problems may begin to view suicide as a viable option for them.

The message about suicide is wrong. By suggesting there are clear and linear reasons why a person would contemplate taking their own life, the series conveys an inaccurate message about suicide. The situation for many people is much more complex, and for some people there are no clear or obvious reasons why they feel how they do. For people unable to identify their reasons for feeling suicidal, there is little to legitimise their experience. Distress is valid and people are deserving of help, whether there is one reason, 13 reasons, or no obvious reason at all. The series also suggests that, with so many reasons, suicide was the protagonist's only option. It wasn't.

The series does nothing to encourage young people to seek help. None of the characters in the series speak to an adult about what's going on. This is true of Hannah before her death – when dealing with issues such as bullying, stalking and rape – and the recipients of the tapes following her death. In fact, the characters are shown going to great lengths to keep information away from sources of potential support. The one time Hannah did seek help, the experience is shown to be negative. This provides an inaccurate representation of support services, suggesting others are incapable or unwilling to help someone in distress.

The suicide scene is extremely graphic. The suicide scene in the final episode of the series is very graphic and makes for difficult viewing. The detail provided and the length of the scene fails to comply with any [international recommendations](#) about the fictional portrayal of suicide. [Research](#) indicates that exposure to detailed descriptions or images of suicide, including methods and means of suicide, is associated with increased distress and can increase the risk of imitation by vulnerable people, particularly those who have been affected by suicide. This is known as copycat behaviour or social contagion.

I disagree with the [producer's claim](#) that it was important to show suicide in unflinching and painful detail. You don't need to see a dead body to understand the realities of suicide.

Others are not to blame for suicide. For anyone affected by suicide, the series is likely to add to the guilt they may already be feeling as a result of the loss of a loved one. By presenting people's actions as reasons for her suicide, Hannah makes others responsible for her death. The final message of the series is that if just one person had done something differently, Hannah might still be alive. Suggesting that there is always someone to blame

when a person takes their own life is wrong and does nothing to alleviate the “what if...?” questions that torment people who have lost someone to suicide. Presenting suicide as a way to “teach people a lesson”, also triggers debate about whether suicide is a heroic or selfish act. These judgements are inaccurate and unsafe (possibly leading to imitation) representations of suicide.

People do not live on through anything left behind. Death is final. The series, however, gives the impression that Hannah is able to live on, after death, witnessing people’s reactions to her tapes, and achieves her desired outcome of teaching people a lesson. This fails to demonstrate the permanence of suicide.

It’s important that we talk about suicide – silence doesn’t help anyone – but broadcasters have a responsibility to know what they are showing and the impact that certain content can have on an audience, especially a young audience. Broadcasters should do everything possible to make it less likely that someone will act on suicidal thoughts when distressed, and part of that is the responsible portrayal of suicide; 13 Reasons Why fails in this respect.